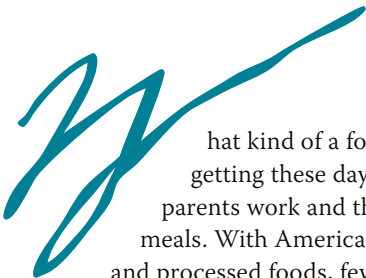




Slow Food in Schools

Garden-to-table nutrition education nurtures petite palates, introducing kids to the pleasures of healthy, farm-fresh eats.



What kind of a food education are children getting these days? In many families, both parents work and there is little time to prepare meals. With Americans' growing reliance on fast and processed foods, few kids get the chance to participate in the growing of food or the preparation of wholesome meals. Wouldn't it be great if schools could give our children practical instruction in growing and preparing food, as well as good nutrition?

Slow Food USA is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving North American food traditions and promoting a sustainable food supply. It recently began a nationwide Slow Food in Schools program to introduce children to "sound food production and an enjoyment of wholesome meals."

These garden-to-table projects are based on the Edible Schoolyard, which began at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California, about 10 years ago. The school hosts a one-acre organic garden whose study and operation are integrated into the school's academic curriculum and lunch program. The students plant and cultivate the garden, and in the kitchen-classroom they prepare, serve, and eat the food they have grown. These activities are incorporated into almost every subject and are part of the normal school day. More than 20 schools nationwide currently participate in Slow Food in Schools programs.

Why do we need such programs in our schools? Don't schools already offer nutritious lunches for our children? Sadly, school lunches are not nourishing our children. Entrées such as chicken nuggets, corn-dog bites, and pizza pockets are typical offerings at many schools. These highly processed foods are loaded with fat and sodium. In fact, the May 2003 General Accounting Office report on the school-

lunch program found that 75 percent of schools exceeded the limit for saturated fat. The study also found that although nutrition was being taught in schools, it was "not enough to show an impact on children's behavior."¹

The Produce for Better Health Foundation recommends at least five servings of fruit and vegetables per day, but its study found that 96 percent of kids ages 2 to 12 do not eat that minimum. The study also found that obesity levels are lowest among those who have high intakes of fruits and

vegetables.² As obesity and diabetes become more and more common in kids, the results of our children's eating habits are obvious.

If school administrators know that children need to eat more fruits and vegetables and less fat, why are schools serving high-fat, processed foods? According to Marty Fujita, a parent of two daughters attending an elementary school in Ojai, California, schools just don't have the money or staff to prepare fresh foods. "Schools are pressed to produce lunches for about \$1.25 per person, so they resort to processed, ready-made, commodity foods that they can get and prepare cheaply," she said.

Because she was concerned about the nutritional quality of food offered at Ojai schools, Fujita decided to take action. She assembled a group of parents, educators, chefs, and growers to find a way to improve nutritional standards and children's food awareness in the school district. Together, they created the Food for Thought program with the goal of exposing children to healthy food choices in the district's five elementary schools. The group collaborated with local farmers to establish a farm-fresh salad bar at all five schools. The salad bars are stocked with seasonal fruits and vegetables from local farms, most of which use sustainable or organic farming methods. "We're not only promoting fresh, seasonal foods, we're also helping the farmers in our community by



Above: A salad bar can provide a nutritious school lunch. Opposite page: Students of Topa Topa Elementary School in Ojai, California, look forward to a weekly salad bar that features locally grown fruits and vegetables.



“Kids are so disconnected from the land and our food. We are trying to reconnect them and help them appreciate what good food really is.”

—MARTY FUJITA, FOOD FOR THOUGHT

getting schools to buy locally instead of from commodity markets,” explained Fujita.

There were some obstacles to getting the salad bar set up. “Delivery systems weren’t in place to get the produce from the farms to the schools, and the food director didn’t have the time to call 20 different farmers each week,” said Fujita. “So we worked out a partnership with Gold Coast Growers Collaborative, who source food from local farmers and take care of invoicing and delivery.”

The salad bar has been a huge success. According to Fujita, there is a 30 to 40 percent increase in the number of lunches purchased on days that the salad bar is offered. “It’s a win-win situation,” Fujita said. “It’s good for the kids because they are eating more fruits and vegetables, and the schools benefit financially.”

It’s no surprise to Fujita that the salad bar is so popular. “The produce varies constantly, depending on what is in season. In addition to fresh salad greens, fruits, and vegetables, there are always protein foods offered, such as cottage cheese,



Top: Food for Thought kids celebrating a spring day. Above: Topa Topa Elementary School kids give organic strawberries a thumbs up! Bottom: Meiners Oaks students hunt for the delectable berry.

tuna, eggs, and nuts,” she said. The salad bar also gives students the opportunity to put their nutrition education into practice as they create their own balanced meals. If they need advice, several parent volunteers are available to help. To add to the fun, students are invited to taste some of the more exotic offerings as they wait in line. “The kids have tried yellow watermelons, pixie tangerines, and persimmons. Some are hesitant at first, but they love the foods once they try them,” said Fujita.

Another aspect of the Food for Thought program is nutritional education. Each quarter, every class in every grade gets a nutrition lesson. In the first session, students were introduced to the food pyramid and food portions. Games were

used to illustrate the lesson, and students learned to make a healthy snack. “They loved it. We showed them how to make parfaits with yogurt, fresh fruit, and granola,” said Fujita.

Like the Edible Garden in Berkeley, Food for Thought also integrates garden-based learning into the curriculum. For example, students learn math as they measure plant growth, and history as they plant things that American Indians or colonists planted. But Fujita hopes they are learning more than academic history lessons. She wants the children to understand how food is grown. “Kids are so disconnected from the land and our food,” she said. “We are trying to reconnect them and help them appreciate what good food really is.”

Field trips to local farms are also offered. On a trip to a third-generation organic farm, third and fourth graders were able to pick and taste strawberries and other produce. “They couldn’t stop eating the carrots,” Fujita said. “They said they tasted better than the ones from the store.”

A garden-to-table program may seem natural for California, but would it be feasible in a city like New York? Judy Joo Allen had been volunteering as a tutor at the Children’s Storefront School, a tuition-free independent school in East Harlem. The school teaches 170 preschool through eighth-grade students, 80 percent of whom are at or below the poverty level. Because obesity and diabetes seem to be more prevalent in low-income families, Allen was concerned for the students’ health. “Statistics show that depressed communities have higher rates of diabetes, asthma, and obesity. A lot of these kids aren’t getting food education at home because getting a wholesome meal is not a priority. Many parents are happy if they can get *any* kind of food on the table,” she said.

While tutoring, Allen noticed that students often forgot their homework, pens, and pencils, but they never forgot their cans of soda. She began talking with the students about the nutritional aspects of soda—the amount of sugar, serving sizes per can, and so forth. She discovered that not only were the children eager to learn about nutrition, but the universal subject of food led to learning opportunities in all academic subjects.

Feeling she was on to something, Allen worked with Yuri Asano, a Slow Food USA convivium coordinator, to establish Harvest Time in Harlem. Third and fourth graders who attend this monthly after-school program learn not only about nutrition and cooking but also about math, creative writing, vocabulary, history, geography, and culture. Typically, a class focuses on a single type of food. For example, in the class featuring tomatoes, children were introduced to many different varieties of tomatoes, which they could see, feel, and taste. Students learned how to select and store tomatoes, as well as about their nutritional value. They discussed the discovery of tomatoes and which countries were first to use them in cooking, thus incorporating history and geography into the lesson.

After the discussion, the kids split into groups and prepared pasta with fresh tomato sauce, salsa with homemade chips, and salads with tomato, avocado, and papaya. They used their reading skills to follow the recipe directions, and their math skills to measure ingredients. As they sat down together to enjoy their meal, students and parent helpers talked about the foods they were eating. What did they taste like? Did they think they could make the recipes at home? After cleanup, children drew pictures or wrote stories about what they had learned and experienced.

The class has taken field trips as well. During a visit to a Whole Foods Market, students learned about whole foods and organically grown foods. At the meat counter, Allen was surprised to find that many kids didn’t know where beef comes from—their guesses included moose and horses. Allen said the children particularly enjoyed the talk on cheese: “The students were amazed to find out that cheese can be made from the milk of animals like goats, sheep, and buffaloes.” She was encouraged to see the kids tasting samples. “It became a contest to see who would taste the stinkiest cheese,” she said.



A proud third grader displays her pick of nature’s bounty.

vegetability

Bending down,
my nose in amongst the platter-sized,
bristly squash leaves (late summer, dewy morning)
I reach into her dark hub
and find there a yellow or pale green
scalloped fruit—so fresh born its blossom
is still attached and up flies the smell—
how shall I call it?—
the smell of
vegetability.

Moist, dark soil
still wet and glistening,
cool from last night’s sprinkling,
rich with food and tiny white roots.

In the night the earth has heaved her hips again
and here I am barefoot, back in the kitchen
with my basket full of morning jewels
and this smell
all over my hands—

a midwife
just home
from a birth.

Hathaway Barry



Above: Chef Marcus Samuelsson teaches students from the Children's Storefront School about food and cooking. Below: A young chef shows off some sweet potatoes. Opposite: A Harvest in Harlem student enjoys a wholesome meal.

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—JUDY JOO ALLEN, HARVEST TIME IN HARLEM

The Storefront School is hoping to more fully integrate food education into the curriculum, including starting a garden, if it can raise the funds. For now, kids are learning the difference between eating something fresh and getting fast food. And they know how to prepare wholesome, delicious food themselves.

Another area where obesity and diabetes are serious problems is on the Pascua Yaqui Reservation, near Tucson, Arizona. Barry Infuso, nutritional anthropologist and chef, worked with diabetic adults on the reservation. “Native Americans and Hispanics have a higher rate of diabetes than the Anglo population—as much as one-third higher,” he explained. “The Pascua Yaqui here either know someone who has diabetes or someone in their family has it.” Infuso encouraged the adults to eat a healthier diet, but many were resistant to change. “They felt they were destined to have diabetes, and there was nothing they could do about it,” he said.

Infuso felt he might have more success working with children, so he volunteered to teach a nutrition program at the reservation's Head Start preschool. “I wanted to get to the kids before they got diabetes,” he said. He established a garden of traditional native foods such as tomatoes, chile peppers, greens, corn, beans, and squash that would be used in the school kitchen. The Pascua Yaqui have a long history of agriculture, and Infuso hoped the parents would be inspired to plant gardens at home as well. “It's not just a matter of working with the children. Unless things change at home, it won't work,” he said.

In addition to the garden, Infuso gives weekly cooking classes at the preschool in which he focuses on healthy native foods. In one class, students made tortillas with whole wheat flour and filled them with fresh vegetables from the garden. In another they mixed up “corny muffins,” which the kitchen then baked and served to the children for lunch.

Along with cooking, Infuso introduces the children to fresh produce. “It's surprising how many children had never eaten fresh fruit,” he noted. “They were amazed to squeeze oranges and make juice. They thought it came from a box. They were



hesitant to drink the fresh juice. That's how removed kids are from where food comes from."

The school administrators and staff are very enthusiastic about the program. "The teachers see this as an integral part of the curriculum, and food service as an integral part of meals. They let me help them plan menus," Infuso said. "They see the importance of healthy food, and they are hoping for a better way of life for the children."

Garden-to-table projects really can affect our children's health. In a study of 8- to 10-year-old African American girls, researchers at the Children's Nutrition Research Center at the Baylor College of Medicine found that eating more vegetables was associated with a healthy body weight.³ Another study looked at data from a school nutrition project and found that when schools offered more fruits and vegetables, children ate more fruits and vegetables.⁴

Most schools lack the resources to create such programs on their own. Parents, community members, and other concerned citizens must take the initiative. According to Cerise Mayo, Slow Food in Schools education coordinator, the best way to get a food-to-table project started is to join a local Slow Food USA convivium, or chapter.



"Slow Food can provide ideas for programs, the steps needed to form a committee, and a list of curricula," she said. "There is not just one approach. You have to look at your needs and resources to see what your community and school can do."

For more information about the Slow Food in Schools program, or to find a Slow Food convivium near you, visit the Slow Food USA website at www.slowfoodusa.org

NOTES

1. Report to Congressional Requesters, "School Lunch Program: Efforts Needed to Improve Nutrition and Encourage Healthy Eating," US General Accounting Office (May 2003): 3; www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?Gao-03-506
2. "State of the Plate Report," Produce for Better Health Foundation (April 2003): 3, 22-23, 41, 46.
3. K. W. Cullen et al., "Anthropometric, Parental, and Psychosocial Correlates of Dietary Intake of African-American Girls," *Obesity Research* 12, Supplement (September 2004): 20S-31S.
4. M. D. Hearn et al., "Environmental Influences on Dietary Behavior Among Children: Availability and Accessibility of Fruits and Vegetables Enable Consumption," *Journal of Health Education* 29, no. 1 (January-February 1998): 26-32.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Edible Schoolyard at Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School; www.edibleschoolyard.org
Food for Thought: The Ojai Healthy Schools Program; www.foodforthoughtojai.org
Produce for Better Health Foundation; www.5aday.com
Slow Food USA; www.slowfoodusa.org, www.slowfood.com

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*Mmm...
Tasty!*

ENSALADA DE AVOCADO E TOMATO (Avocado and Tomato Salad)

Cut into small cubes:

- 2 large avocados
- 2 pounds tomatoes
- 2 pounds papaya
- 2 small red onions
- cider vinegar to taste
- olive oil to taste
- juice of 2 lemons
- salt to taste
- pepper to taste

In a large bowl, combine avocado, tomato, papaya, and onion. In a small bowl, whisk together vinegar, olive oil, and lemon juice. Pour over avocado mixture. Taste and season with salt and pepper. Serve immediately, or chill and bring back to room temperature before serving.

Donated by Elizabeth Fassberg, MPH, RD, CDN

CORNY MUFFINS

- 1 cup cornmeal
- 1 cup whole wheat flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 6-ounce can cream-style corn
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup diced onion
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped green chiles (may be canned)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons pimento (optional)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter

Preheat oven to 400°. Lightly oil muffin tins. Combine all dry ingredients except sugar in a large bowl. Combine beaten egg, milk, and sugar. Blend with dry ingredients. Add corn. Sauté onions, pimento, and chiles in butter for 5 minutes, or until onions are soft. Combine all ingredients and spoon evenly into muffin tin (about 4 tablespoons for each muffin). Top each muffin with pimentos and bake for 20 minutes, or until golden brown and tests dry when a toothpick is inserted.

Donated by Barry Infuso